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AUTHOR Gamble, Linda
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ABSTRACT

This report characterizes the problem of shortage of qualified special educators in rural schools and describes the Rural Special Educator Project developed to address this problem in Maine. The traditional model demanding that individuals wishing to broaden their skills must leave their community to receive training works in direct opposition to the maintenance of strong community ties. This project forges tighter bonds between teacher and local schools through applied educational opportunities. The project goal is to make special education training at the baccalaureate degree level available and accessible to persons who are currently indigenous to and/or employed in rural Maine. The project is based on the special education degree curriculum at the University of Maine at Farmington, and courses are offered over the Interactive Television System of the Education Network of Maine. The primary target populations for the program are transitionally and conditionally certified teachers currently working in classrooms. The second target population are education technicians working in schools who would like to obtain a baccalaureate degree. Course delivery began in the summer of 1993 and average enrollment is 100 students statewide. Extensive time has been devoted to advising, establishing teacher/mentor relationships, course redesign to meet the needs of nontraditional students, and design of evaluation tools. Contains 16 references. (RAH)

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PREPARING RURAL SPECIAL EDUCATORS USING DISTANCE LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES

Linda Gamble, M.Ed.
Rural Special Educator Project Director
University of Maine at Farmington

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Introduction

One of the things we value in educators in a rural setting is a commitment to place. Being established in the community and feeling a connection provides a sense of continuity and strength to the school setting. This is true of all educators but often is more important in Special Education, where teachers are dealing with situations that extend beyond the school and impact the life of the student both in and out of school.

All over the country educational administrators from elementary to post-secondary levels are being faced with demands to provide educational equity to students regardless of the students' location. Administrators in increasing numbers are seeking new ways to effectively deliver classes to students and distance learning has become an attractive solution.(Johnstone, 1991) Our traditional model for educating and upgrading teaching skills, however, works in direct opposition to this connection with community. We demand that individuals who wish to broaden their skills must leave their community, move to another community, and receive their training and apply what is learned elsewhere. The goal of the project Preparing Rural Special Educators Using Distance Learning Technologies is to enhance the educational opportunities for both teachers and students by offering course work, and a degree program, in an outreach format. Rather than leaving the community, this project forges even tighter bonds between teacher and local schools through applied educational opportunities.

Background

Testifying before the Senate Subcommittee on the Handicapped and the House Subcommittee on Select Education, Dr. William Carriker noted, "According to figures released by the U.S. Department of Education, the number of special education teachers that are needed has been steadily increasing over the last decade with the shortage growing by more than 10,000 between 1984 and 1986." Furthermore, the National Center for Education

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Statistics reports a 35% decline in special educators graduating from personnel preparation programs in the decade just ending. (Reprinted from *News & Notes*, 1989.)

Rural schools experience severe shortages and high turnover rates in special education and have historically faced a persistent challenge in providing for the needs of those students requiring specialize services (Theobald, 1991). A summary of these problems is provided by Helge (1984) as a result of a survey of over 200 special education administrators from rural LEAs in all 50 states. Respondents reported that difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified staff were the two most serious problems following funding inadequacies. Sixty-six percent said they had difficulties recruiting staff, while only 17% said they had an adequate number of personnel. Most (92%) of the respondents said that emergency certification was used frequently. Given that many rural special education teachers have little or no training in special education and/or rural life, it is little wonder that national attrition rates of 30% to 50% are the norm in rural districts.

It is clear from all available data, therefore, that there is a critical shortage of fully certified special education teachers. This shortage is most acute in rural areas, both nationally and in Maine. The rural regions of Maine are also where the greatest number of minority children with disabilities may be found. Special education training programs in Maine are not providing the necessary supply of teachers to Maine schools to meet the demand for special education services, a trend that is true nationwide. And, even when students do receive certification in Special Education, there is little promise that they will locate in the rural regions of the state by choice. Marrs (1984) found that prospective rural special educators generally fall into three categories: (a) Individuals who have grown up in rural communities and are interested in working in special education, (b)Individuals who are place-bound in rural areas and are forced into teaching special education by circumstances, and (c) Individuals who accept positions in rural areas knowing nothing about ruralness. A further study by Helge and Marrs (1982) found that special educators who have grown up in rural communities, those in the first group, are most likely to remain in rural districts since they have goals, mores, expectation, and lifestyles similar to the families they serve. Special Needs Students have suffered severely from this shortage, as have school personnel who are struggling to do the best they can under adverse circumstances. High

attrition rates in the special education staff inhibit the development of stable connections among school staff members and between staff members and parents. In addition, the high rate of turnover within a program is seen by personnel directors as disruptive to special education program continuity and planning.(Theobald, 1991)

Maine's rural regions mirror rural regions nationwide, often being extremely poor and isolated by geographic conditions that make travel slow, even in good weather. These conditions, combined with a strong sense of community and the inability to leave work and family, keep many of Maine's rural inhabitants from participating in higher education. Therefore, if Maine, and other states, are to have special educators fully prepared to teach in rural areas, training programs will have to make educational opportunities available locally. Indeed, research has shown that hiring regular education teachers already in the community and providing resources to help them obtain special education certification, as well as encouraging classified staff members who are already serving handicapped children to become certified in the field is an extremely successful recruitment and retention tool. (Theobald, 1991)

Project Design

The goal of the Rural Special Educator Project is to make special education training at the baccalaureate degree level available and accessible to persons who are currently indigenous to and/or employed in rural Maine. Aside from the primary goal of increasing the number of fully qualified special education teachers; the project will develop materials specifically designed for use in distance learning and pilot a model for making quality practica experiences available in remote settings.

Course work offered within the Project is based on the curriculum of the Special Education Degree at the University of Maine at Farmington. The sequence of courses is designed to meet the standards for certification within the state of Maine. Students who currently hold a baccalaureate degree in any field can seek transcript analysis from the State Division of Certification and then take courses that are offered under the auspices of the Rural Special Educator Project. Since the primary target population for these courses are transitionally and conditionally certified teachers, teachers who are currently working in classrooms across the state, courses will require practical classroom application of theories discussed. Most courses are offered over the

Interactive Television System (The Education Network of Maine) which is a two-way audio, one-way video system that broadcasts to approximately ninety sites throughout the state. Students attend classes, much in the same way they would on a campus, and participate in lectures, discussions and activities both within their sites and using a telephone conference system. Courses are offered during times that best suit working professionals in education: after school and in the evening hours. The grant also permits the exploration of other learning structures including pre-recorded video classes with follow-up discussions, on-campus intensive workshops, audio instruction and computer-based instruction. As the project progresses we hope to identify the best delivery method for each course required for certification.

The second target population for the grant is individuals who are education technicians working in the schools and would like to upgrade their skills and obtain their baccalaureate degree. The grant was written to accommodate thirty-five students and allow them the time to complete their degree requirements. These students take the same courses as those that are offered for conditionally and transitionally certified teachers, and are expected to apply theories within their school setting. In order to successfully do this, however, it is necessary for these individuals to have the support of the schools in which they work. Therefore, application to the Rural Special Educator Project was based upon both the desire of the individual to complete this program and the willingness of the school to be supportive of their application. In addition to the completion of the courses required for certification, students who enter the baccalaureate degree program are required to fulfill general education requirements and a concentration in one of several fields. Students are supported in their efforts by the Project staff, a faculty advisor and a teacher/mentor from their local school. Since the project is a four-year "experiment" it is essential that all students make continued progress in their program if they hope to complete the degree in a timely fashion. The identification of a teacher/mentor in the school is a key component to the success of the project. Individuals interested in this role have been offered the opportunity to participate in a training program. This program provides them with the tools for supervision of the practica as well as updating them on current issues in Special Education. By acting as a teacher/mentor, these individuals will add to their own knowledge base, earn necessary recertification credits, and assist in training new personnel in Special Education.

Replication

While our project depends partially upon utilization of the Interactive Television (ITV) System that is in place within the state, there are aspects of the design that are easily replicated without such a system. Additionally, many states with a large rural population have systems in place to offer education using distance technology but have not considered the option of offering a degree program and continuing teacher education using those systems. If the project meets with anticipated success it may be possible, in some places, to directly replicate project activities or to modify them to suit available technologies.

The response to this project continues to be overwhelming. It appears to meet a most urgent need for non-traditional students and individuals who have identified a desire to move into the field of special education. It is clear that we have identified a very real need within the education community. In order to work effectively, the following steps were taken initially:

*An Advisory Board was established which includes representatives from the education community, the state and the University. This group assists in design and implementation of the project.

*Three brochures were designed. The first was sent to a targeted mailing list that included Education Technicians and Directors of Special Services throughout the state. Within a month of sending out this mailing we received over two hundred inquires into various aspects of the project. Responses came from every corner of the state of Maine and included both current teachers and education technicians, individuals interested in pursuing a career change and individuals in related fields who might benefit from courses offered in various aspects of special education. The follow-up brochures were designed to answer questions of individuals who already held a baccalaureate degree and those who wish to participate in the program during years two, three and four.

*An admissions packet, which included specific questions related to the project, was designed and returned to interested students.

*Courses are being redesigned to better serve the non-traditional student working in distance sites. Course delivery began in the summer of 1993 and continues each semester. Average enrollment in the Interactive Television courses is 100 students statewide. It is anticipated that course offerings will

continue after the completion of the grant since all materials and instructional design will be prepared.

*Course offerings system-wide were evaluated for transferability and advising purposes.

*A teacher/mentor training program was held during the summer of 1993 to meet the dual goals of training in practicum supervision and informational update. Each matriculated candidate has a mentor partner to extend academic and career support.

*Evaluation tools have been designed to examine the success of students in this type of learner setting. Pre- and post-course evaluations are completed by students and faculty. On-going evaluation of baccalaureate candidates is utilized for advising and course design purposes. We anticipate using the evaluation information to refine our efforts and to provide information to other institutions who wish to explore this avenue of program delivery.

*An extensive amount of time has been devoted to two issues: student services and advising. Advising has been offered through summer sessions with matriculated students, over the telephone, and through a "phone bridge" which provides a toll-free number for students to call. Financial aid, a key to educational success for many, continues to be the most challenging issue. We anticipate "brokering" this degree - working in conjunction with another UMS campus - to deliver student services.

Conclusion

Preparing Rural Special Educators Using Distance Learning Technologies appears to have found an enthusiastic and willing audience. We anticipate being able to provide on-going information about the design and implementation of this project, including course format and instructional materials. Overcoming the obstacles of distance and access and making special education training at the baccalaureate degree level available and accessible to people in rural Maine is a worthy goal. It is compatible with findings that almost all special educators hired by rural school districts are trained in-state (Theobald, 1991) and honors the goals and drive of the highly motivated student who is pursuing a course of study significant to a particular goal (Cookson, 1989) The project should also help to assure that the best possible education, in the most caring and least disruptive environment is available to rural children with disabilities.

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